Language mosaic. Developing literacy in a second-new language: a new perspective

Aura Mor-Sommerfeld

Abstract

This article presents a new approach to examining second language writing among young learners, which I define as "Language mosaic". It offers a new perspective on the process of writing development and examines how and what children do in the writing process while developing an additional language.

The concept of *language mosaic* combines two elements: the relationship between first and second/new language (e.g. interlanguage; code-switching) and the process of the first stages of writing development in a new language. In this article I analyse children's writing in the light of *language mosaic* features and discuss it as representing writing development in particular and literacy in general in the first stages of learning a new language.

Introduction

Second language[1] researchers discuss various aspects of writing development, focusing on the different stages (and ages) of this process. Some refer to the process of composition, taking into consideration advanced second language learners (Zamel 1983; Johns 1990; Krapels 1994; Leki 1996). Others (e.g. Edwards 1998; Kenner 2000) introduce us to young children's writing, focusing on the first stages of the process of literacy acquisition in the new language. McLaughlin (1990) discusses the relationships between the first and second languages of the learners, examining similarities and differences between both skilled and unskilled writers. It seems that the shared view common to all these works is the notion of the process, and acceptance of the importance of that process.

In this article I wish to present and suggest a new approach to examining new language writing among young learners, which I define as *language mosaic*. The concept of this work combines two elements: the relationship between first and second/new language and the process of the first stages of writing develop-ment in a new language. It aims to expand this notion and to elucidate the process of literacy acquisition in second language by focusing on writing. It offers a new perspective on the process of writing develop-ment, and examines how and what children do in the writing process while developing an additional language.

The procedures suggested for such examination are as follows: a) defining 'language mosaic'; b) setting out the theoretical background, briefly referring to: inter-language, the concept of print, phonological aware-ness, and L1 and L2 in relation to a 'language mosaic' perspective; c) analysis of children's writing and discussing this in the light of language mosaic features; d) discussion of language mosaic as repre-senting writing development in particular and lit-eracy in general in the first stages of learning a new language.

Language mosaic: definition

I define *'language mosaic'* as both a style (the outcome) and a way (the process) of writing by a non-native (i.e. newcomer to a language) combining two or more languages and incorporating various scripts. For me, it is an aspect and an extension of 'interlanguage', which refers to the spoken modality of a language. As in a biological mosaic (a condition in which an organism or part of it is composed of two or more genetically distinct tissues), or in architecture (a surface formed of small pieces in a harmonious composition), *language mosaic* consists of small, vary-ing patterns or organisms combining to create a new form or entity. In the case of written language, this entity is the result of a writing process that ultimately creates a coherent (new) form.

Language mosaic: theoretical background

Basically, language mosaic relies on the following aspects: the concept of interlanguage; "code-switching"; concepts about print; and L1 and L2 relationships. The combination of these issues gives rise to the new concept, which I define as 'language mosaic'.

The concept of interlanguage. Interlanguage has been widely researched (Selinker 1972; Cook 1993; Sharwood Smith 1994, and others), as regards spoken language. It is defined as 'the systematic behaviour of non-native speakers of a given language, normally understood to be what is produced in natural situations of language use where the focus is on conveying meaning and not on the formal correctness of utterances' (Sharwood Smith 1994). But is interlanguage really only found in spoken language, as suggested? What function does it serve and fulfil in written language? How can it affect development in the process of learning a new language and reinforcing the mother tongue? This article is an attempt to shed some light on this issue.

Code-switching. Code-switching refers to the mixing of two languages and can occur at the word, phrase, clause, or sentence level (e.g. "I'm going to Paris avec mon amour"). Both code-switching and interlanguage refer to spoken language. The intention of this work is to examine this strategy as expressed in written language.

Concepts about print. Young children's writing is strongly connected to and influenced by the concepts of print (Clay 1978) and phonological awareness (Garton & Pratt 1989). Both are crucial to literacy acquisition, and find their expression in the actual ability to read and write. The following sections analyze their role in writing, and examine them both in the light of L1 and L2 relationships and as a significant part of language development.

Features of language mosaic

As a metaphor, language mosaic plays the same role as mosaic constructions in biology and architecture. It incorporates and integrates various elements in order to create a new, coherent, unified structure. As with spoken language (or in our case – in written) – a mosaic of language is behaviour, or a set of behaviours. The question is how to understand this aspect of in-between behaviour in written language(s) and what should be our points of reference for this (new) system.

I identify four characteristics of written interlanguage. These are:

(a) transference from one language to another in a written text, using varying scripts;
(b) transference from one script to another within a single word;
(c) transference from one language to another using a single script;
(d) children from countries using a non-Latin alphabet attempting to write English, with the aid of key location on the computer.

The following attempts to extend this issue and examine mosaic features, exposing and analysing them through examples of children's writing. All the examples display mosaic features, and are divided into the categories proposed at the beginning of this text. They all belong to L1 Hebrew children, most of them six to eight years old, making their very first steps in English. Some, as we shall see are still in the middle of the process of their first language literacy acquisition. Only one example comes from a ten-year-old girl who began to learn English a year earlier. Each figure is self-explanatory. A general discussion follows.

A. Transference from one language to another, using different scripts

The following first three figures are examples of transference from one language to another in a single written text, using the 'correct' script of the chosen language. The first example is by a 3rd grade pupil, 8 years old, and the second is by 2nd grade pupils, 7 years old.

Figure 1 shows transference from one language to another in a written text, using two different languages and scripts. It reads (underlined words are originally in English; all other words are translated from Hebrew):

1 *"Mother, I <u>wanted</u> to pick a rose*
2 *<u>Just for you</u>*
3 *<u>but I</u> was pricked*
4 *and it is so <u>**sore**</u>, like a cut of a **saw**."*

The child composed a poem-story using Hebrew and English. In the last line he created a rhyme with the English word '*sore*' and the Hebrew word for saw (*masor* מסור): "I wanted to pick a rose just for you. But I was pricked and it is **sore**, like a cut of a **saw** (*masor*)."
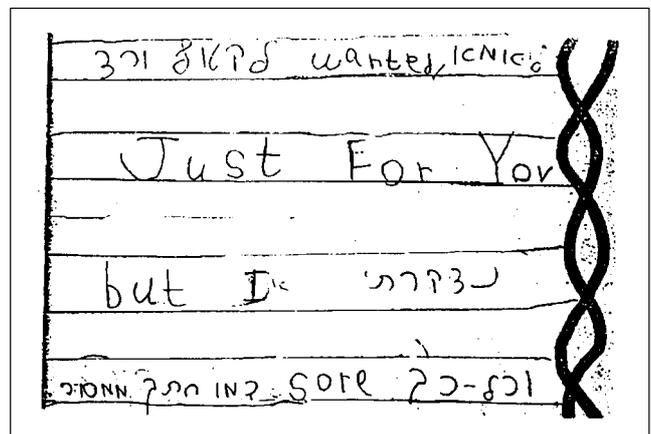
Example 1: Just for you

Figure 1. (3rd grade pupil, age 8)

Retaining both rhythm and the rhyme, the child followed and met the 'rules' of writing a poem, combining two languages in a creative way. It was his choice, taking a risk, overcoming obstacles, creating this form of a coherent text, expressing language mosaic.

Figure 2 shows another example of transference from one language to another in a written text. In this case, the child used English words which were familiar to her; e.g. one (line 1); animals (line 2); frog, fish, butterfly, bird (line 3); eyes (line 5); boy (line 7); animal (line 8) etc. The child's story, which opens with "once upon a time" (see "one", line 1) is about little animals that had a fight with a monster, and were finally saved by a little boy.

Two linguistic aspects should be noted: 1) the child never repeats any of the words twice. That is to say, she writes either in Hebrew or in English. 2) The child's metalinguistic awareness, expressed by the way she uses the plurals for animals. When she began to write she asked her teacher what to do in order to change a singular word – animal – to the plural form; "we change from singular to plural in Hebrew, so I think we have to do something in English too" she explained to her teacher. Being able to formulate such a question indicates a metalinguistic awareness not just of her first language, but also of languages in general.

Fig. 3 suggests an additional view on this issue. The title is "Things I like." In the second line the child wrote in Hebrew: "foods which I like", and in the
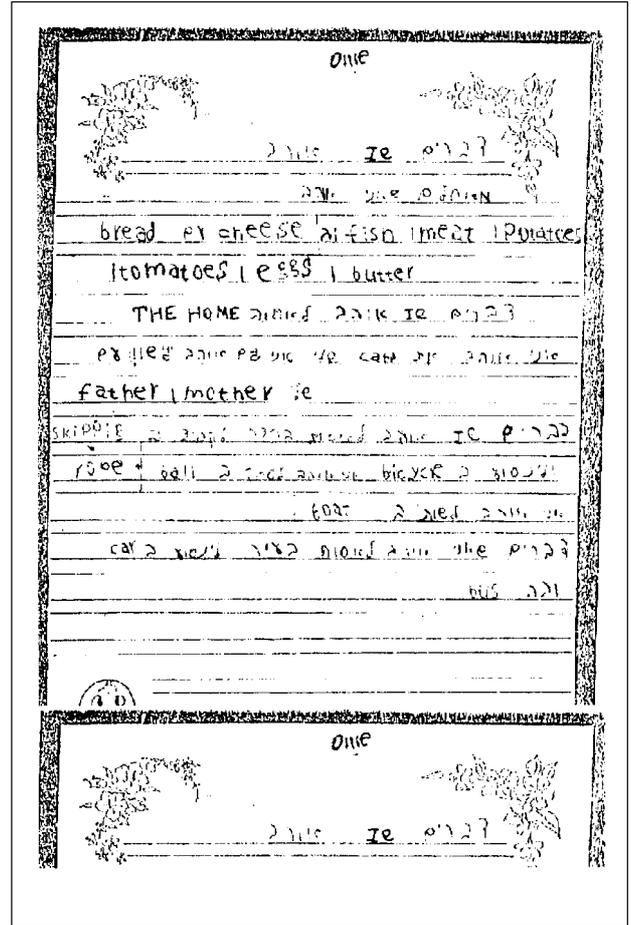
Example 3: Things I like

Figure 3. (2nd Grade pupil, age 7.5)
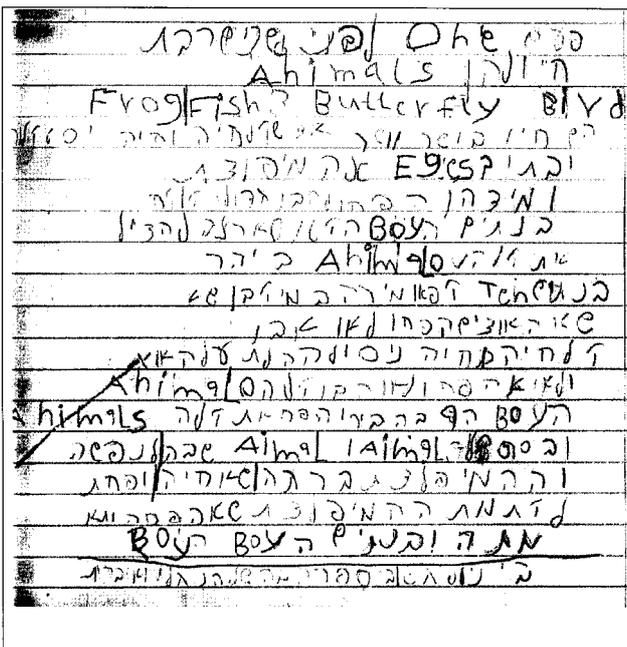
Example 2: Once upon a time…

Figure 2. (2nd grade pupil, age 7)

third line he made a list, using the letter "ו" which means "and" in Hebrew, between each of them. The child began that list from left to right. Then, from right to left, he wrote "things I like to do at home". I and the home are written in English. The home is written in capital letters because this was how he saw it in one of the books he had in his class.

"I like my" cat, "I also like to sleep with my" father and mother. Father and mother are written in English, "and" and "my" in Hebrew. Yet, what makes these two lines so fascinating is the fact that he has created a natural continuity between the two languages by writing the word father from the left side.

Most of the child's English words are nouns. Only once he used a verb – to skip – and made sure, with arrows, that the reader would be able to understand properly what he meant. The child was very proud of his creation. When he was asked why he had done it this way, he answered that since he knew these words in English, and he wanted to write about things he liked, it seemed the most sensible way to do it.

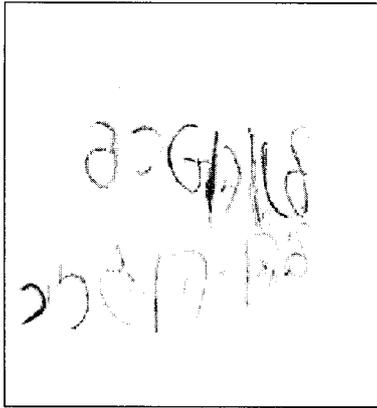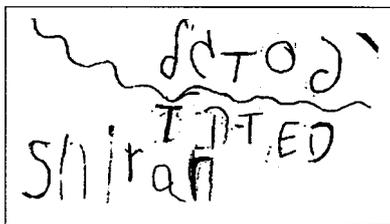*Example 4: The G/T connection – giraffe and festival*

Figure 4a.

Figure 4b. (1st grade pupil, 6 years)

B. Transference from one script to another within a single word

Figures 4a and 4b show examples of script transference within a single word. The child, 6 years old, 1st grade pupil, uses the letters "G" and "T" to represent the same sounds in Hebrew.

In these examples, Shiran, Hebrew L1, 6 years old, demonstrates a high phonological awareness, which leads her to creative writing. Shiran, 1st grade, wrote two meaningful words both in Hebrew and English. In her first attempt she wrote 'Giraffe' and in the second – 'fesTival'. When her teacher asked her how she came to write this she replied that it happened when her parents redecorated their house with new tiles. The tiles were organized in piles, each with a letter in English. Her big brother taught her the letters, and it was her own idea to create such a 'mosaic'.

What is fascinating in Shiran's act is the words she chose for her experiment. It is not just that she decided to use her new knowledge in a very creative way, but also the words she selected – Giraffe and Festival. There is no "J" in the Hebrew alphabet. In order to register "J", the writer adds an apostrophe to the equivalent letter to G ("ג") (as in "*g*ame"), thus: G' ('ג). Only "borrowed" words (from other languages, such as English, French, Italian) have this sound in Hebrew. Shiran has as it were, created a new system for registering this sound in Hebrew.

The same procedure accompanied the second experience, though the "T" does have a letter in Hebrew. In fact, there are two letters which represent this sound. What is interesting here is that the child remembered to drop two letters in Hebrew (not just the parallel consonant for "T" in Hebrew – but also the vowel, equivalent to the "ee" sound, thus creating "tee").

It seems that 'language mosaic' assists the child's phonological development. It thus mediates between spoken ('phono') and written language, and between first and second languages, so that we can speak in terms of 'whole child' rather than 'whole language'. Such writing behaviour can be seen as a necessary stage of development in second language learning.

C. Transference from one language to another using a single script

This feature of language mosaic is to be found among those who master the alphabet of the target language and have complete phonological awareness in that language as well as in the mother tongue. The two languages then play the same role of functional communication.

This e-mail was sent from Israel to the USA and had to be written in English because of the computer communication system. It was sent by an Hebrew L1 child who had started to learn English at school two years before this message was sent. The message was addressed to her mother, who was visiting a university in the USA. This child could have written the whole message in English (or in Hebrew, using the Latin script on the keyboard), but chose to mosaic her language in a very special way. Her aim was to create connection with her mother as soon as she could and language mosaic provided her with a 'quick solution'.

It says (translated into English):

1 *"subject: I am alone at midnight ('mid-nite').*
2 *Daddy went to sleep and I am alone.*
3 *I want that we will do 'talk' if you in the 'computer'!!!*
  Did you understand me? I am asking since I have lots of
  mistakes! I will go to bed about 01:30–02:00.
5 *Send me mail until 01:45, and then we shall try to*
  communicate!!
6   *Love you,*
7   *XXX"*

The text begins in English and continues in Hebrew (written in Latin script) after the question 'did you *hevant* (understand) me?'. Twice she used quotation marks when she used an Hebrew word in an English sentence ('levad' in the first sentence; and 'hevant' in the third). This is an example of transferring from one language to another using the same script. Again, it

Example 5: The e-mail

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***From root Wed Jul 24 07:00:38 1996
Date: Wed, 24 Jul 1996 14:00:10 +0300 (IDT)
   Subject:       ani lavad be hazot (mid-nite)


         tan go to sleep and I am 'lavad'.
   I want det we will do 'talk' if you in the 'computer'!!!!! did you 'havant' me?  shalti ki yesh li hamon
shgiaot! aheye lo bamita ad 1.30 - 2.00
tishlehi li mail ad 1.45 ve az nenase letacsher!!!
            love you,
      she
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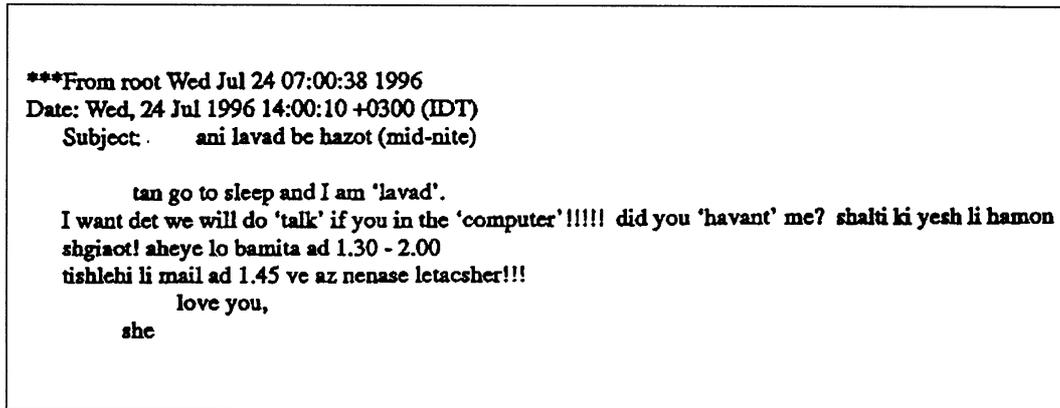
Figure 5. (5th grade pupil, age 10)

displays and enlarges understanding of the term the 'whole child'.

In terms of language mosaic, the case here suggests a hidden mosaic, but an evident language. The discussion in the next section examines this issue and answers a possible question: why should such a feature be considered as one of language mosaic.

D. Aid from key location on the computer

This section deals with writing by pupils from countries using a non-Latin alphabet, who attempt to write English assisted by location of the keys on the computer (fig. 6).

Figure 6 shows an attempt to write in English, helped by locating the keys of the computer. This is a mixture of position of the letters on the keys and the their sounds. As mentioned earlier, all keyboards in Israel have at least two alphabets (English and Hebrew, English and Arabic, or all three together), which means that any key has at least two letters on it, though these letters do not represent the same sound (with the exception of the phoneme R).
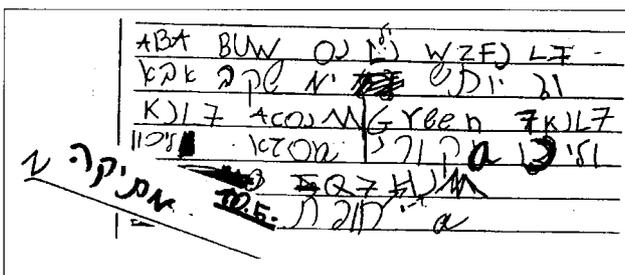
Example 6.: A maths problem

Figure 6. (1st grade pupil, 7 years)

Figure 6 is a mathematical problem. It reads:

"Father asked Yotam to bring him 7 Kg ('7 KJL') of green grapes and 7 Kg of pears. What was the total weight?"

When the child composed this arithmetic problem she was sitting near a computer. She did not use the computer to write, but used the information she got from the keyboard (the shapes of the letters) to invent a game. She played with two scripts, which needed to be deciphered in order to solve the maths problem (sum).

Here we must consider: a) Why did she use capital letters? b) How did she deal with directionality? c) Is there any degree of phonological awareness?

The implications are that: a) Her reason for using capital letters – was because the computer keyboard displays only capital letters; b) In terms of directionality – she was able to show her reader and explain exactly what she meant, although her original intention was to play with and between the two languages; c) As regards phonological awareness – it is expressed in the Hebrew text as well as in the English version: the first word top-left "ABA" (in Hebrew) means "father" (in English).

The child's original work offers us an opportunity to examine L1 and L2 relationships and to see the influence of the ability to manipulate between two scripts on the child's cognitive behaviour. This issue will be discussed in the following section.

Language mosaic features: discussion

When examining the data, relevant to *language mosaic*, three main issues are of concern:

I creativity;

II metalinguistic awareness and reading-writing connections;
III L1 and L2 relationships.

I Creativity

At first sight mosaic language might be seen as a game invented by children who are discovering new situations or new opportunities. I assume that it indicates procedures adopted or discovered by young children who are developing a new language. As with a child acquiring first language literacy, these attempts are a kind of bi-developmental (in terms of simultaneous) process. If we accept that interlanguage is an essential stage in second language development (Miller 1983; Moore 1999), then we should also accept its variations in the written form of the language.

Emig (1983) distinguishes between *mistake* and *developmental error.* According to Emig, a mistake may retard learning, but a developmental error will advance it. Errors provide us with two important pieces of data which are not found in mistakes: 1) errors are 'brave' and take risks; 2) errors are rational and intelligent. On the other hand, mistakes remain with what is familiar, and may even denote fear and/or anxiety. Developmental error, then, reflects adventure and experiment, when the writer tries to write in a new way. In this case, the unfamiliar new way is the combination invented by the child, never seen or used before in 'models' such as texts, by teachers or other experts. This is why I prefer to call it creativity.

II Metalinguistic awareness and reading-writing connections

All examples present metalinguistic awareness. In all of them it is represented through phonological awareness and in some of them it is also represented through grammatical awareness (e.g. figure 2: the child's story, using plural – "animals" and singular – "animal" in English).

Example five (figure 5) belongs to both categories. It represents metalinguistic awareness, showing the child's understanding that she can write in English script in order to be understood in Hebrew. It also represents phonological awareness, since the child indicates that she realizes that it is possible to use English letters in order to say what she wants to say in Hebrew. Example four (figures 4a, 4b) offers yet another expression of phonological awareness, evidence of much creativity, logic, and imagination. Figures 4a and 4b, (transference from one script to another in the same word) could not have been written if the child had not had phonological awareness. Figure 1 ("just for you") broadens this aspect by demonstrating an ability to play with the two languages through rhyme and metre.

I argue that none of the examples presented here could have been written without a certain degree of metalinguistic awareness in general and phonological awareness in particular. This aspect could shed some light on the literacy debate regarding phonemic instruction. This new language thus enables us to look at this issue through somebody else's eyes, and from an absolutely different perspective.

This discussion also gives us an opportunity to consider reading-writing connections, and to understand them as shown through the children's writing. All examples (except figure 6, which requires a skilled first grade teacher to read it) can be read by any English-Hebrew bilingual. Creatively and courageously the children have formed a new model and set up a possibility for new interpretations of reading-writing connections. Obviously, this issue is linked to L1 and L2 relationships.

III L1 and L2 relationship

In some ways, *language mosaic* opens a new vista on the relationships between the first and the new language. All the examples are communicational texts, readable and understandable by any Hebrew-English speaker, viable because of creativity and metalinguistic awareness. Obviously, this does not apply to Hebrew script for English speakers only. The issue of first and second language relationships now enters a new phase. The relationships have so far been discussed as concerns spoken language in terms of interlanguage. Now researchers have to consider discussing the written forms in terms of language mosaic. The traditional consensus regarding L1 and L2 relationships discusses this in terms of interferences or influences, but I propose a more positive point of view. It seems to me that when young children develop literacy in a new language by means of more than one language, this becomes a catalyst which causes them to look into their first language and to consider it in a new and creative way.

Written language mosaic: an interlanguage dialogue

Writing language mosaic is a kind of written conversation, a dialogue between two languages conducted by a single child. It seems that children's use of written language mosaic is a creative act. This is not necessarily a conscious "invention". It happens because they are led by their ideas and their new experiences as learners of a new language. During the writing process they conduct a "talk" (a "conversation") between the language they already know (and are still developing), and the language that they are acquiring (and developing). Thus, on the one hand this can be seen as a game, on the other the procedure displays an act of control of their knowledge.

As with children who are developing their first language, analysis of the written samples suggests a systematic method of producing the language. For instance, in the first stages of language acquisition, when children begin to talk, their utterances are usually based on nouns. If we go back to figures 2 and 3 – we clearly see that the children emphasize the use of the noun. All the words in English, except the word <u>one</u>, (figure 2, line 1) are nouns.

Examples one, two, three, four and six (figures 1, 2, 3, 4 (a+b) and 6 suggest yet another aspect, that of directionality. Again, systematically, the children "manipulate" the different-opposing directions of Hebrew and English, and control them by 'walking' and 'moving' from one side to the other, creating a winding path like a snake. Thus, in figure 1, line 1 runs from right to left, and line 2 runs from left to right; line 3 runs from left to right and line 4 from right to left. Figure 1 also suggests another aspect, i.e. transitions through phrases. The child who composed this poem created a coherent text by moving from one language to another, employing his 'complete' knowledge in one language to reinforce and overcome his limited knowledge in the second, in order to systematically manipulate them for his own purposes. This more advanced and higher stage could be compared or parallel to a child's development in the first language.

The fact that the children systematically use written mosaic gives this form coherence (the examples given clearly present coherent systematic mosaic writing). The dialogue is thus conducted between different parts of the language: nouns in one language with verbs in the other, conjunctions or bridging letters between words and phrases, and directionality. All of this involves and requires creativity as well as logic, and phonological knowledge as well as other elements of metalinguistic awareness. All the examples display all these qualities.

Summary

This work has presented a new perspective on developing writing in a second-new language. Through examination of children's (Hebrew L1) writing it has discussed features of language mosaic, seeing them as both creative and cognitive (metalinguistic) elements belonging to the learning process. It has suggested that, right from the beginning, we should view the process of new language development in terms of the child's own experience, beliefs and understanding.

In all the cases presented here, language mosaic occurred naturally. This fact probably exposes positive attitudes – beliefs and insights – the children had towards both the target language (English) and literacy. Does this mean that written interlanguage, or language mosaic as I refer to it, is a necessary stage? I.e. is written interlanguage, as I refer to it, a necessary step towards mastering languages? To this question there may not be a single, unequivocal answer. However, it does seem to open a new perspective on developing writing in a new language. Moreover, it enables us to discuss through this phenomenon not just the new language, but also the mother tongue of the learner. Is there any possibility that learning literacy in a second language might facilitate L1 literacy acquisition? A broad inquiry is needed in order to answer this question.

Note

1. I define any language that is learnt after the first as a second or a new language.

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CONTACT THE AUTHOR
Aura Mor-Sommerfeld, Hand in Hand: The Centre of Jewish−Arab Education in Israel, P.O. Box 6398, Haifa 31063, Israel.
e-mail: amor1@netvision.net.il.